



Turkey is Syria's northern neighbor and an important regional actor. Despite a decade of warming relations between the two countries, when the Syrian conflict began in 2011 the Turkish government was quick to condemn the Assad regime's crackdown on protesters, establish its support for the opposition, and call for active international intervention.

When protests erupted in Syria in March 2011 and the Syrian government responded with violence, the Turkish government exerted its diplomatic influence to try and push Assad towards moderation. As the months went on and the government's tactics became increasingly lethal, Turkey became more vocal about its support for the opposition and its condemnation of the crackdown. By the end of 2011 Turkey [welcomed](#) the nascent Syrian opposition leadership (both political and military), opened its borders to Syrian refugees, and [began cutting](#) economic and political ties with the Syrian government. Turkey closed its embassy in Damascus in [March 2012](#), one year after the uprising began.

Today, Turkey hosts the largest refugee burden in the world with almost [2 million](#) registered Syrian refugees, and has spent more than [\\$6 billion](#) supporting them. But despite these tremendous humanitarian efforts, Turkey faces criticism for many of its policies towards Syria, particularly its lax border controls. The 250-mile-long border between the two countries has been the most porous of the war and border facilitated the growth of terrorist organizations like ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra by allowing them to smuggle arms, oil, money, and fighters into and out of Syria. Turkey has also been [accused of](#) directly funding and arming some of these extremist groups, a charge that it denies.

The Turkish government has long desired a stronger international response to the crisis in Syria. A host of political considerations and calculations rooted in the complex regional dynamics have informed Turkey's views as the conflict has unfolded. Turkey is motivated by its hopes for a Sunni-led, pro-Turkey government to take over Syria, one more aligned with its interests and not supported by Iran, as well as a desire to prevent an empowered Kurdish [PKK](#) from setting up an autonomous zone on the border. While Turkey does not directly oppose the Kurdish [PYD](#) in Syria, it does have links to the Iraqi-based PKK, which it considers a terrorist organization. The warming relationship between the Syrian government and Syria's Kurdish minority early in the conflict – when Assad began granting the Kurds long-denied political and cultural rights in return for their allegiance – was a key driver of Turkey's support for the Syrian opposition.

Turkey is less secure as a result of the Syrian war. There have been a series of deadly incidents on or near the Turkish border with Syria, in addition to the notable Syrian Air Force downing of [a Turkish jet](#) in June 2012 and the Turkish military downing several [Syrian aircraft](#) it claims violated its airspace. Turkey has also struggled to cope with increasing internal terrorist threats, mainly from ISIS-linked militants. The most deadly terrorist attack occurred on July 20, 2015 when an ISIS suicide bomber killed 32 people in the Turkish town of Suruç.

Several days after the bombing in Suruç, Turkey joined the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS and began airstrikes in Syria and Iraq. It also agreed to allow the U.S. to launch strikes against ISIS positions from the Incirlik Air Base in southern Turkey. While Turkish airstrikes in Syria have been directed at ISIS targets, its airstrikes in Iraq are targeting the [Kurdish PKK](#). Turkey claims that as part of the increased cooperation against ISIS, the U.S. finally agreed to help enforce a limited [buffer zone](#) in Syria along the northeastern border with Turkey extending 40 miles deep and almost 70 miles long. The U.S. has publicly disputed the details of such an endeavor, highlighting the underlying differences in U.S. and Turkish policy towards Syria and calling the feasibility of the buffer zone into question. Turkey's engagement in the coalition and announcement of the buffer zone presage Turkish intent to take more aggressive actions in Syria moving forward, which may include the deployment of Turkish troops into Syria to defend the buffer zone along its border.